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Dorvan Byler
Kent State University at Stark, db080214@ohio.edu

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Dorvan Byler
Kent State University at Stark

INTRODUCTION

The religious contexts in which early Christian communities grew were important factors in the first-century development of Christianity, affecting what it meant to become a Christian either as a convert from a background in Judaism or as a convert from a background in Greek, Roman, or Egyptian cults. Surrounding religions and cultural norms strongly influenced the first Christian communities in urban environments throughout the Roman Empire because the first generation of Christian converts came directly from other religious constructs. As the early Christians distinguished themselves from the Diaspora Jewish communities in which they originated and actively pursued Gentile converts, the fusion of believers with differing religious backgrounds caused uncertainty and conflict over acceptable beliefs and practices within Christian communities.

Much of the historiography of early Christianity dwells on Christianity's relationship to Judaism. The tendency to highlight the Christian-Jewish relationship is natural since Christianity originated in Israel as a Jewish sect. The conflict throughout the New Testament between the "Judaizers" and Paul lends itself to questions about Christianity's relationship to the Jewish religion and culture: how members of Christian communities were different from those remaining in Jewish communities, when the differentiation occurred, and the extent to which Judaism was monolithic. Answering these questions has occupied volumes upon volumes, and writers such as Judith Lieu continue to address them, especially in *Neither Jew nor Greek?,* her collection of essays.

The discussion of group interactions between the Jewish and Christian communities, however, often does not include the surrounding polytheists or henotheists as a third partner despite Christianity's rapid expansion into the Roman world, and, even when such discussions do occur, they are often deficient. Historians such as William H. C. Frend have treated this topic by discussing only the role of emperors and governors in persecution of the Christians, leaving out an account of ordinary people in the polytheistic population. Treatments of interactions between Christians and members of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian cults generally center on encounters between elite members of the two societies. Yet the Roman emperors did not represent the beliefs or practices of all of Greco-Roman society, nor did the Apostle Paul embody the entirety of Christian thought.

Left unanswered by this elite-centered approach are questions about the interactions and differences between the general population of Christians and polytheists/henotheists. Writings from non-elite citizens of this time period are rarely extant, leading most historians to focus on leaders such as the Apostle Paul. Several historians, though, have made efforts to fill this hole. Wayne Meeks, in *The First Urban Christians*, attempted to read between the lines of Paul's letters to understand the Christian communities. Meeks admirably endeavored to reconstruct early urban Christian society but did not discuss the Christians in parallel with their neighbors who followed other cults; he focused on Paul's conception of an ideal Christian instead of trying to discover the lives of non-elite Christians. In *Pagans and Christians,* Robin Lane Fox did discuss both groups, attempting to describe the transition of the European world from polytheism to Christianity, but he rarely explained how the two groups coincided at the same time and in the same place, which is the focus of my essay.

Given the difficulty of providing evidence for broad statements about religious communities throughout the Roman Empire, I have chosen to narrow my focus to one particular setting: Roman Corinth in the first century. Analyzing the population in one location during a specific time frame allows clear comparisons among Christians, Jews, and worshipers of Roman, Greek, and Egyptian cults instead of general statements about how most Christians related to most Jews or polytheists throughout the Empire. Corinth is a compelling choice for this type of study because its population contained significant numbers of Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians. Its role as a seaport in the center of the Roman Empire ensured a constant interchange of individuals from throughout the Empire. The Apostle Paul, Strabo, Appian, Apuleis, Plutarch, Pausanius, and other ancient writers who reference Corinth provide ample primary source material. These sources, as well as architectural evidence, suggest an interpretation of the Christian, Jewish, Roman, and Greek populations in Corinth and provide a platform for discussing the effects of the local religious environment on the development of early Christianity.

In first-century Corinth, the influx of Gentile converts with backgrounds in various polytheistic cults influenced the Christian community and motivated Paul to write letters to the Christians urging them to leave behind parts of their cultic backgrounds he saw as sinful. Paul's efforts to correct the Christians' behavior imply that at least some of them were involved in the activities that Paul warned them to stop. Paul's commands should not be read as a synopsis of what the entire Christian community believed or how they behaved but rather as an insight into those members of the Christian community who opposed Paul, thus motivating him to argue his case against them on various points. An analysis of Paul's warnings and advice for the Christians, combined with a discussion of the Corinthian Jewish and polytheistic cults based on information gathered from other ancient literary sources and archeological studies of Corinth, provides a way to understand the difficulties and social pressures that converts with backgrounds in Judaism or polytheistic cults faced in making the transition to Christianity.[1] Converts struggled to leave the religious constructs of their pasts as they joined the Christian community, showing that Christianity in Corinth was not formed in a vacuum but in constant interaction with the religious constructs that surrounded it.

The individuals who converted to Paul's Christianity brought with them beliefs and behaviors rooted in their past religious experiences. Whether they

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[1]For a similar methodology, see Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change.*

were originally a part of the Diaspora Jewish community or one of many poly-theistic or henotheistic cults, all members of the early Christian community converted from another religious construct, and the integration of people from different religious backgrounds raised questions about what was proper practice for Christians. Paul's letters to the Corinthians offered his answers to these questions, but his arguments show that his thoughts were only a part of the conversation; he was in dialogue with groups within the Corinthian church who had already formed other opinions. These groups were strongly influenced by their religious backgrounds, of which there were many when Paul arrived in the diverse city of Corinth to tell of Jesus of Nazareth.

"TITIUS JUSTUS, A GENTILE WHO WORSHIPED GOD."

According to the narrative of Acts 18, set in the 50s CE, the Apostle Paul was run out of the Jewish synagogue in Corinth after successfully converting its leader, Crispus, to his message of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. As was his custom throughout his missionary journeys, Paul responded to the Jewish rejection by turning to the non-Jews of the city (Acts 11:6; all references to and quotations of the Bible are from the *New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version* edited by Michael D. Coogan). He moved his ministry to the house of a Gentile convert named Titius Justus. Having relocated down the street from the synagogue, Paul continued his evangelism in Corinth for eighteen more months, establishing a community of Jesus followers that has endured since. Though Titius Justus is a Roman name, Acts described him as one who feared the Jewish God. First century Corinth, with its layers of ethnic and religious complexity, is well represented by Titius Justus, the Roman worshiper of the Jewish God turned Christian.

The diversity of Corinth demonstrated by Titius Justus was rooted in its dynamic political history that transformed the city from independent Greek πόλις (*polis—city-state*) to Roman colony. Once a flourishing center of Greek culture and commerce, Corinth led a league of city-states in rebellion against the expansion of Roman dominance over the Aegean Peninsula in 146 BCE. The Romans overwhelmed the Greek resistance and chose to make an example of Corinth by razing the city, killing the male population, and selling the women and children into slavery. The city was left desolate, and the Greek period of Corinth's history ended. From 146–44 BCE, Corinth remained almost completely deserted, with only a small number of Corinthian descendants lingering among the ruins. Not all of the buildings were

destroyed during the Roman sack of the city, but they suffered from years of neglect. During this period, Corinth was a political non-entity.

Recognizing the strategic location Corinth once held, Julius Caesar ordered the colonization of Corinth in 44 BCE, a hundred years after its destruction. The new colony was populated by Romans and quickly began to regain its former prominence among the cities of the region, firmly under Roman control. By the time of Claudius in 44 CE, Corinth had become the capital city of the province of Achaea, and during Claudius's reign Paul arrived in the city, nearly a hundred years after its refounding as a Roman colony (Engels 14–19; J. Walters 400–403; Polybius 38.9.2–18.12; Strabo 8.6.23). Because of Corinth's history, the city was both Greek and Roman: appearing Roman and functioning as a Roman city but maintaining strong Greek roots. The Roman colonists, though mostly ethnic Greek freedmen, brought with them the Roman form of government. Moreover, many of the original colonists were Roman citizens with full Latin names, as found on inscriptions and coins (Engels 68). According to Pausanias, the new Corinth was "no longer inhabited by any of the old Corinthians" (2.1.2), yet Corinth's location was still the same, surrounded by countryside filled with Greeks who made their way to the new city. The private language within the colony was chiefly Greek as witnessed by graffiti markings, but Latin was used for all public monuments and government business. The layout of the forum and much of the new architecture was Roman in style, but the old Greek temples that remained were still used, as well as the old Corinth's theater and water fountains. Corinth in many ways gained a strongly Roman civic identity given its colonial charter and Roman population, but as the city grew and added Greek residents, elements of Corinth's past entered the civic identity once again (Walters 408–410; Engels 95–113). Though Corinth became more Greek, the Greek elites had to become more Roman to navigate the political world of the Empire. The citizens of newly founded Roman Corinth learned how to navigate both cultures, maintaining Corinth's Greek heritage while presenting a Roman appearance to the world (Millis 30–35).

By the end of the first century, the urban center of Corinth had a population of about 80,000, with an additional 20,000 in the surrounding rural areas (Engels 33, 79–84, Appendix 2).[2] Corinth became once again the commercial center of the Aegean Peninsula as merchants sailing from one end of the

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[2]Engels notes that Aresteides wrote of Corinth as the largest city in Roman Greece, but Engel's guesses at the size of Corinth's population are done without census data, making them tentative at best (Appendix 2).

Empire to the other chose to ferry their goods across the Isthmus of Corinth rather than risk the dangerous seas south of the Cape of Malea. Tourists flocked to Corinth bi-annually for the Isthmian Games, a festival of athletic competition more renowned than the Olympic Games to the west. In addition to the games, religious cults devoted to Greek, Roman, and Egyptian gods attracted visitors with impressive temples and regular festivals. Corinth's heritage as an ancient Greek city included special prominence in several Greek cults, especially those of Aphrodite and Poseidon, whom Corinthian coins often displayed as advertisements of religious services in their honor. Roman religion was also well represented in Corinth, which became the center of the federal imperial cult of Achaea, serving as the focal point of emperor worship in the province. The Egyptian deities Isis and Serapis had a strong presence in Corinth as well, with multiple temples around the city. Finally, Jews who came to the city for commerce or to live had several synagogues within Corinth, and the local courts granted them official recognition. The arrival of Paul and his message of Jesus was only a small addition to the already complex religious scene in first-century Corinth (Engels 92–100).

The popularity of Corinth as a destination for citizens of the Empire, whether for business, pleasure, or religion, ensured that the city fostered diverse interactions among people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Titius Justus exemplifies these layers of interaction as a Roman who spoke Greek, worshiped with the Jews, and converted to Christianity. The early Corinthian Christian community was composed of individuals converted from Jewish, Greek, or Roman ethnic backgrounds who had previously worshiped the Jewish God or Greek, Roman, and Egyptian gods or any combination of them. As these converts joined the Christian community, they brought beliefs and practices from their former religious experiences with them. The blending of differing religious backgrounds caused behavioral conflicts between members of the Christian community, especially between converts from a polytheistic background and those from a Jewish background.

"IT IS VEILED TO THOSE WHO ARE PERISHING"

Upon his arrival in Corinth, Paul encountered a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla. Natives of the Roman province of Pontus, they had recently arrived from Rome after the emperor Claudius had expelled Jews from the capital city (Acts 18:2; Suetonius 25.4). Aquila and Priscilla illustrate the scattered nature of first-century Judaism, which was found not only in Judaea but throughout the Roman Empire. Known as Jews of the Diaspora, or dispersion,

"it was not easy to find a place in the inhabited world which this tribe has not penetrated and which has not been occupied by it" (Strabo qtd. in Josephus 14.7.2). A Diaspora community was clearly present in Roman Corinth, with at least one synagogue and most likely several more (Acts 18; Levinskaya 166). Unlike the Jews of Jerusalem, most Diaspora Jews assimilated to some degree into the surrounding culture, speaking in Greek and engaging in trade with their Gentile neighbors. Interactions with Gentiles were frequent enough in Corinth to inspire some of the non-Jews who surrounded them, such as Titius Justus the God-fearer, to join them in worshiping the Jewish God. Despite some level of integration, the Jews of Corinth managed to maintain their identity and separation from the Gentiles through weekly meetings at local synagogues, cultural differences such as dietary restrictions and circumcision, and continued interaction with the homeland of Jerusalem evidenced by the annual Jewish tax for the temple in Jerusalem (Ferguson 427–430; Levinskaya 145–148).

Early Christianity was entirely Jewish in background, originating within the Jewish religious construct and gradually creating points of separation from Judaism until it became clearly separated from it. Recent work on Jewish-Christian relations, especially in the Jewish Diaspora, has tended to emphasize a much less pronounced distinction between the two groups. Several recent scholars have described early Christianity as a sect of Judaism, decades from becoming a separate religion (Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?* 11–29). An important element of this movement is the discrediting of Luke, the writer of Luke and Acts, as a theologically motivated historian whose main purpose is to highlight Jewish antagonism to Christianity (Jack T. Sanders 1–4; Fitzmeyer 124–128). Other writers such as Irina Levinskaya have upheld the use of Luke-Acts as historical documents, not by claiming that they are free from theological motivation but by arguing that they are as relevant as Paul's epistles or the works of ancient historians (viii, 2, 11). Luke's bias as a Christian author who saw the Jews as the main source of opposition to Christianity should not eliminate his voice from the conversation. Rather, his writings should be read in concert with other source material to ascertain the historical reality, just as the writings of other ancient authors should be paired with one another. In Corinth, evidence from Paul's letters at least partially confirmed the Jewish-Christian antagonism noted in Acts, lending credibility to Luke's account.

According to Luke, Paul's mission to Corinth started in the Jewish synagogue, where he attempted to persuade the Diaspora community to join the

movement of Jesus' followers. The amount of time he spent there is unclear, but Luke claimed he spoke "every Sabbath," suggesting an extended period of time, and that he addressed both the Jews and Greeks found at the synagogue, referring to the Gentile God-fearers who were present. Though Paul's time at the synagogue came to an abrupt end when he was run out and forced to move his ministry to Titius Justus's house, his strategy in targeting an audience already familiar with Jewish principles aligns with the many similarities of first-century Christianity in belief and practice to the Jews of the Diaspora.

The concept of heritage—fitting into a historical story as Israel, the People of God—marks one of the key similarities between Diaspora Jews and Corinthian Christians. Further similarities can be seen in the Jewish and Christian weekly services as they both involved praying, reading and interpreting scripture, and eating communal meals. Christian rituals of baptism, communion, and foot washing, though given their own peculiar flavor, were analogous to Jewish practices. Both Jews and Christians maintained the need to resolve judicial disputes among their own members internally (Meeks 80; 1 Cor. 6:1–8). Christians adopted the Jewish stance toward Greek and Roman idol worship, claiming a sharp division between those who served one God and the rest who worshiped many gods, who were effectively non-gods (Meeks 166). Neither Christian nor Diaspora Jewish worship involved sacrifice, the Christians because they believed Jesus was the final sacrifice and the Jews because all sacrifice occurred at the temple in Jerusalem. "Most important, the Pauline Christians took over the scripture, large and basic parts of the belief system, and a great many norms and traditions, either whole or with some modifications, from the Greek-speaking synagogues" (Meeks 81). These common belief systems and practices were reinforced in the Corinthian Christian community by the presence of Jewish and God-fearing converts who arrived in the Christian world with backgrounds in Jewish thought, such as Titius Justus and the president of the synagogue in Corinth, Crispus (1 Cor. 18:8; Acts 18:8).

Although the Christians shared beliefs and practices with the Diaspora Jewish community, important distinctions started to evolve. According to historian Shaye J. D. Cohen,

> The separation of Christianity from Judaism was a process, not an event. The essential part of this process was that the church was becoming more and more Gentile, and less and less Jewish, but the separation manifested itself in different ways in each local community where Jews and Christians dwelt together. In some places, the

Jews expelled the Christians; in others, the Christians left of their own accord (228).

The separation in Corinth was clear to Paul: faith (πίστις—*pistis*) in Jesus was the dividing line, and the Jews who failed to believe in Jesus were deceived and destined to perish. He longed for the Jews of Corinth to join him in having faith in Jesus but considered those who refused to be not true followers of God. Some of the Corinthian Christians from a Jewish background, however, were primarily hesitant about leaving strongly held Jewish practices behind, especially dietary restrictions and circumcision, and Paul had to convince them to continue the process of separation.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul offered a harsh critique of the Jews and confirmed a separation between the two groups:

> Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. [The background of Paul's reference to Moses can be found in Exodus 34:29–35.] But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Cor. 3:12–16)

Paul's words marked a bold distinction between his gospel of Jesus Christ as Messiah and the Jewish message of the Mosaic covenant. Although both audiences were listening to the reading (ἀναγινώσκηται, *anagignoskeitai*) of Moses, Paul argued that only those who turned to the Lord could properly understand the true meaning. Further, as he continued to make distinctions, Paul labeled the "old" covenant of Moses the ministry of condemnation and the "new" covenant of Jesus the ministry of justification. Though he maintained that there was glory in the first ministry, he claimed that its glory was now lost in comparison to the second ministry's τῆς ὑπερβαλλούσης δόξης (*teis huperballouseis doxeis—surpassing glory*). This second ministry, the ministry of Christ, was not only more glorious but also was permanent according to Paul. Joining the covenant of Christ granted freedom and transformation through the Lord, who was the Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα, *to pneuma*).

In a final condemnation of the Jews, Paul stated that "even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are ἀπολλυμένοις [*apollumenois—perishing, or being destroyed*]. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds

of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). Notice that natural blindness was not the cause of the Jews' lack of sight, but a physical κάλυμμα (*kalumma—veil* or *covering*), suggesting that those blinded would have been naturally able to see the "light of the gospel," just as the Christians could, but for the presence of a veil placed over their minds by the "god of this world," or Satan. The Jews who did not believe could not see the truth of the gospel because Satan had deceived them so that they were unable to see through the blinding veil to the gospel of the glory of Christ and were ultimately destined to perish. Clearly, Paul saw and articulated a major distinction between the Christian and Jewish communities in Corinth.

Welcoming the new covenant of Jesus at the expense of the Jewish covenant of Moses was not merely a spiritual distinction but had practical implications. The most important way the Christians enabled the Gentiles who surrounded them to join their group was by eliminating the significant Jewish barrier of male circumcision. A council of Christian leaders in Jerusalem before Paul's arrival in Corinth partially influenced the Corinthian Christians' understanding of the role of male circumcision within Christianity. The council occurred after some men from Judea came to Paul's home church in Antioch preaching that "unless you are circumcised according to the Law of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Paul and his companion Barnabas disagreed strongly, and after a debate the matter was taken to Jerusalem for the apostles and elders there to adjudicate. The Acts account noted the importance of religious background in determining who advocated circumcision, setting "some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees" and argued the necessity of circumcision against Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:5). Peter joined Paul and Barnabas, claiming that the church should not place the burden of circumcision on the Gentile converts since "we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are" (Acts 15:5). James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, gave the final word, outlining a compromise that allowed Gentiles to remain uncircumcised but called on them to avoid eating meat that was offered to idols or strangled, touching blood, and engaging in sexual immorality. This compromise was sent via letter to the church at Antioch and most likely to the other churches as well. Paul departed on his next missionary journey soon afterwards and would have arrived in Corinth with the Jerusalem council's decision in hand.

Though Paul undoubtedly taught the Christian community his view of circumcision when he was there, some Christians were still uncertain what

they should do about the Jewish practice several years later. In 1 Corinthians 7:17–20, Paul gave his "rule in all the churches," urging people to remain as they are: if uncircumcised, not to seek circumcision; if circumcised, not to attempt to remove the marks of circumcision. "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called." By Paul's reasoning, following that of the Jerusalem council, God no longer commanded circumcision, and this represented a strong shift from the Jewish use of circumcision as a boundary between themselves and everyone else. As noted in the passage in Acts, at least some of those from a Jewish background would have found this shift difficult to accept. That Paul felt obliged to address the subject shows that differing opinions about circumcision were present within the Corinthian Christian community, with some Gentile converts considering becoming circumcised and some Jewish converts considering hiding their circumcision.

The removal of the circumcision requirement enabled the Christian community to aggressively proselytize Gentiles. When Paul was pushed out of the synagogue, he made the move to Titius Justus's house and continued his preaching, intent on spreading his gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles outside synagogue. Diaspora Jewish communities did not engage in aggressive evangelism of Gentiles although though some Gentiles were attracted to the synagogues, as evidenced by Paul's ability to witness at the Jewish synagogue in Corinth to "both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 18:4).[3] In strong contrast to Jewish attitudes toward missions, Christians held evangelism as a key component of their faith. Paul, whose presence in Corinth was evangelical in nature to begin with, clearly had no problem with continuing his mission among the Gentiles after being run out of the Jewish synagogue. He wanted the Christians in Corinth to flee from idols and avoid immorality, but at the same time he wanted them to interact with people outside of the Christian community. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul finished his denunciation of the man living with his stepmother by recalling how he told the Corinthians not to associate with "the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need

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[3]Authors who argue convincingly that first-century Judaism was not actively missional include: A. T. Kraabel, 'The Roman Diaspora: Six Questionable Assumptions'; S. J. D. Cohen, "Was Judaism in Antiquity a Missionary Religion?"; M. Goodman, "Jewish Proselytizing in the First Century." The most significant evidence against missional Judaism is the silence of Josephus and Philo on the matter; they both knew of the presence of proselytes but never mentioned any push by Jews to actively pursue Gentile converts. For a summary of both sides of the argument, see Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts*.

to go out of the world" (1 Cor. 6:9–10). Though the community was to have boundaries, its members were at the same time to evangelize the Corinthians outside of those boundaries, a prospect made much more palatable by the removal of circumcision.

Corinth's Christian community accepted and pursued all who were willing to become believers. By opening the door to all, no matter their religious background and without strenuous requirements such as circumcision, the Christians gained converts the Jews would not. However, the influx of Corinthians who did not share a background in Jewish moral law caused the boundaries of the Christian community to be stretched and strained, compelling Paul to write letters full of reprimands and corrections. Those within the Christian community who did not see a need to uphold the Jewish moral law stated "all things are lawful for me" (1 Cor. 6:12), denoting an openness to behavior outside of Jewish norms. In the context of in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, Paul's response to this slogan indicates that it was being used to justify sexual interactions with prostitutes. This mindset can also be seen in 1 Corinthians 5, where some of the Christians respond to a man living with his stepmother with φυσιόω (*fusioō*—*arrogance* or *conceit*) rather than shame. The Corinthian Christian community was thus becoming more diverse in its understanding of moral norms by evangelizing Corinthians with religious backgrounds outside of Judaism.

As Christians decided against dietary laws and circumcision and for aggressive evangelism, those with Jewish backgrounds had to struggle with leaving behind their religious norms. Further, as more Greeks and Romans with backgrounds in polytheistic cults began to convert, the Christian community had to debate what the moral code of Corinthian Christianity should be: whether it should throw out the moral law of Judaism along with the ceremonial law or require that new converts learn to change their ways and leave behind the religious constructs of their past.

"FLEE FROM THE WORSHIP OF IDOLS"

The mission to the Gentiles was successful enough that Paul addressed the Christians as ἔθνη (*ethnei*—*Gentiles* or *non-Jews*)[4] in 1 Corinthians 12:2: "you know that when you were ἔθνη, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak" (author's translation, 1 Cor. 12:2). Throughout the letters, Paul's discussions of idols alluded to individuals in the Christian community

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[4]Literally, "of the nations." The NRSV has "pagans."

who had interacted with idols regularly. Luke claimed as well that Paul was highly effective in gaining converts from the non-Jews of Corinth who had backgrounds in Greek, Roman, and Egyptian idol-worshiping cults (Acts 18:10).[5] All of the idol-based cults in Corinth and throughout the Roman Empire embraced polytheism, allowing for the integration of multiple deities in one supplicant's religious experience; converts joining the Christian community would have brought this model with them. Paul was fighting against this concept through his epistles, attempting to persuade his audience not to add following Jesus to their other religious practices but to cease from all religious activity outside of Christianity.

For the Gentile Corinthian converts who were not God-fearers or proselytes, viewing their new faith as exclusive would have been a shift in religious practice. Although the Jews had a long history of exclusivity, the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian cults in Corinth did not; they welcomed the worship of multiple deities. The Greco-Roman cults worshiped gods who fulfilled one or several aspects of life, such as Poseidon, the god of the sea and earthquakes. Though the Egyptian goddess Isis was perhaps an exception who fulfilled multiple roles (McCabe 56–66), the Isis cult most worshiped in Corinth specifically focused on Isis Pelagia, or Marine Isis, inventor of the sail and guardian of the seas (Smith 228–229). In contrast, the Christian God fulfilled all needs and encompassed all facets of life. Worshiping Him alone was enough to ensure divine protection from any kind of disaster and the provision of any service necessary. Therefore, worship of gods other than Him was blasphemous. Paul, quoting an early Christian confession, said "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:6).

Another shift in religious structure for converts from polytheistic cults would have been the Christian acceptance of the authority of the Scriptures found in the Septuagint and also the ongoing authority of the apostles to speak or write commands from the Lord. The authority of the apostles is seen in the Jerusalem conference about circumcision recorded in Acts 15, when the judgment about circumcision was treated as binding to all the churches. Paul defended his apostolic authority throughout his letters as he argued against other leaders who tried to supplant him in Corinth (1 Cor. 11). In 1 Corinthians 14, he wrote, "Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual

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[5]Notice that the Lord's word that "there are many in this city who are my people" comes after Paul has left the synagogue, implying that these people were Gentiles.

powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized" (1 Cor. 14:37–38). In 2 Corinthians 13, Paul referred to the "authority the Lord has given me" (2 Cor. 13:10) in a warning that he might need to be severe in using that authority if the Corinthian Christians in question did not amend their faulty ways. New Corinthian Christians who came from a background of religious fusion that honored multiple gods would not have been accustomed to such a leader claiming authority from God to instruct them, as this structure was not typical in other cults (Rothaus 135–40).

Some of Paul's commands—notably his views on circumcision and dietary laws—were efforts to create a more inclusive atmosphere for converts from polytheistic backgrounds. By disregarding circumcision and allowing the purchase of meat in the marketplace without question, Paul and the Christians who followed him eliminated two of the biggest obstacles that had previously faced converts to Judaism. However, although Paul argued for inclusivity on these fronts, he took a strong stand against Gentile Christians interacting with their past religious practices, specifically the worship of idols:

> Therefore, my dear friends (ἀγαπητοί, *agapetoi*) flee from the worship of idols. I speak as to sensitive people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what they sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Corinthians 10:14–22)

Paul urged the Christians to "flee from the worship of idols," indicating that some of the Christians were engaging in cult practices involving idol worship. Paul declared participating in sacrifices to idols to be incompatible with worship of the Christian God. He claimed that though the idols themselves were without power, they represented demonic powers that were not God.

Since offering sacrifices implied fellowship with the one being worshiped, the Christians continuing their involvement in idol worship were fellowshipping with the demons, a practice that provoked the Lord to jealousy.

Fleeing from the idols of Corinth would not have been an easy task for the non-Jewish people of Corinth who joined the Christian community. Public life was integrated with honoring the gods and the emperor and his family through festivals, games, and sacrifices. Emperor worship was a significant part of creating a Roman identity throughout the empire, and neglecting to participate in giving honor to the ruler and his family would have placed Corinthian Christians outside of the civic community in some respects (Winter 269–86). Additionally, each of the gods represented a means by which to navigate various parts of life: how to deal with sickness, ensure safe travel, gain fertility, or even create a historical identity (Engels 92–120). A new Christian attempting to cut off these lingering connections would have had to find a new structure to manage these aspects of life. Some of the new Christians of non-Jewish background failed to separate from the religious customs of their past, and others who succeeded in completely "fleeing from idols" in obedience to Paul's directive surely arrived in the new Christian community influenced by the religious experiences of their past.

Methods of healing are one example of the shift in religious practices from polytheism to Christianity. One of the first cultic sites that had been renovated after the founding of the colony at Corinth was the sanctuary of Asklepios, the god of healing, who was worshiped throughout Greece at dedicated healing sanctuaries, including one at Epidauros, forty miles to the south of Corinth, that attracted visitors from all over the world. These sanctuaries became sites for training doctors, and Asklepios himself functioned as the ultimate doctor. Though Asklepios's mythical father, Apollo, also was known as a god of healing, only Asklepios fulfilled the role of healer exclusively (Wikkiser 46). Asklepios was credited with curing ailments of all kinds such as infertility, paralysis, gout, headaches, insomnia, and even baldness. Worshipers in need of healing brought terracotta votive offerings of a body part, such as an eye, leg, or arm, and offered them as a request for healing or in thanks for a healing that had already occurred. Hundreds of these offerings have been found in the remains of the Corinthian Asklepeion (Fotopoulos 54). Supplicants came to the sanctuary to spend the night, reporting in the morning how Asklepios had healed them. At Epidauros, those in need of healing sometimes stayed for weeks or months until their ailment was healed. Corinth's Asklepeion was not equipped for long-term visits, however, and so most likely functioned as

a local healing sanctuary only. For the Corinthian public, the Asklepeion was the hospital of the city and the most likely space in which miraculous healing could occur.

In contrast to seeking healing at the Asklepeion, Christians in Corinth may have turned to one of their own with "gifts of healing according to the one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:9) that Paul refers to in his listing of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians. Examples of healing among the followers of Jesus are found in Acts: Peter and John healing a lame man, Peter's shadow falling upon the sick and causing healing in Jerusalem, and Paul himself raising a young man from the dead who died from a two-story fall out of a window after falling asleep when one of Paul's messages became long-winded (Acts 3:1–10; 5:12–16; 20:7–12). Paul's inclusion of the gift of healing in his list of potential gifts from the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 implies that the gift of healing was not exclusive to Christian leaders such as Peter or Paul, meaning others in the community were able to use power from the Holy Spirit in this way. Additionally, Paul's lengthy discussion of how the Corinthian church was exceptionally gifted by the Spirit and the inclusion of "gifts of healing" in his list indicates that the community in Corinth likely had one or more individuals with this gift. Corinthians who became Christ-followers maintained an understanding of healing as a supernatural gift but from a different source than those who turned to Asklepios for remedies. Rather than bringing offerings to a sanctuary in exchange for a cure, Christians needed to find someone with the gift of healing from the Holy Spirit and have faith in the Holy Spirit's ability to work through that individual. Finding healing within their own community was necessary because, if the Christians were to heed Paul and "flee from the worship of idols," approaching Asklepios with votive offerings was not an option.

Though Corinth's Asklepeion was overshadowed in fame by the nearby sanctuary to Asklepios at Epidauros, the same is not true for the Corinthian shrine to the goddess Aphrodite. As Athens was considered the city of Athena, Corinth was called the city of Aphrodite. The small Corinthian temple to Aphrodite of the first century was situated on the Acrocorinth, which is the highest point in the city, indicating importance. The Aphrodite worshiped on the Acrocorinth was Aphrodite Hoplismene (Armed), the defender of the city. Images on coins, a wall fresco, and statuary remains depict Aphrodite looking at her reflection in the shield of Ares, affirming her image as the military protector of the city. Other manifestations include Aphrodite Anadyomene (Rising from the Sea), referring to the story of Aphrodite's birth as a grown

woman from the sea and connecting her with Poseidon and the sea in mercantile Corinth (Williams, "Corinth" 98). Several other representations of Aphrodite around the Corinthian theater show her naked to the waist, often in a bath (Williams, "Roman" 245), as the goddess of love and beauty whose worshipers would have honored her not for protection through her military prowess but for the fulfillment of their domestic needs, including those of a sexual nature. The historian Strabo's remarks about the temple of Aphrodite gained for Corinth a reputation of lasciviousness:

> It owned more than a thousand temple-slaves (ἱερδούλους, *hierdoulous*), courtesans (ἑταίρας, *hetairas*), whom both men and women had dedicated to the goddess. And thereafter it was also on account of these women that the city was crowded with people and grew rich; for instance, the ship-captains freely squandered their money, and hence the proverb, "Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth." (Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20)

This excerpt has led many commentators to decry the immorality of Corinth and marvel at the Apostle Paul's ability to plant a church in such a wicked city. Such a judgment is faulty, however, as Strabo's statement was clearly about how the temple used to be, using past tenses to describe the practice (was: aorist; had dedicated: pluperfect; squandered: imperfect). Later in the same chapter, he referred to the temple of Aphrodite in the present tense and described it as a small temple, without any mention of riches or a thousand temple-slaves (Budin 165–167; Lanci 213). Additionally, Charles K. Williams II argued that the cult of Aphrodite Hoplismene must have been a state-sponsored cult since its images appeared on Corinthian coins and that it is highly unlikely that a Roman-sponsored cult would have promoted institutionalized prostitution since there is no evidence of such practices occurring elsewhere in the Empire (Williams, "Roman" 245). Lastly, there is no architectural evidence of a facility able to house Strabo's one thousand prostitutes (Fotopoulos 173).[6] If there were in fact contrary to these evidences temple prostitutes for Aphrodite, Strabo's information must have been greatly exaggerated. The existence of sacred prostitution in first century Corinth cannot be established, and is unlikely.

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[6]Fotopoulos is one of the few authors who finds sacred prostitution in Roman Corinth somewhat plausible, though he admits that it is not provable. He cites Williams as raising a possible scenario in "Corinth and the Cult of Aphrodite" (21).

Though Aphrodite's temple prostitutes did not surround Paul upon his arrival, the sexual norms of Corinth still contrasted strongly with his prescribed sexual practices for the Christian community, and new Christians joining the community in Corinth would have had to adjust to new expectations of sexual behavior. Evidence of Corinth's reputation as a place sanctioning prostitution and open sexuality can be found beyond the supposed temple prostitution in the worship of Aphrodite. Lais, a renowned courtesan (ἑταίρας, *hetairas*), was considered the standard for beauty throughout Greece during the Peloponnesian War era in the fifth century BCE. Tourists continued to visit her tomb outside of Corinth in Roman times, indicating some level of acceptance of her occupation (Pausanias 1.2.4–5). The Greek poet Aristophanes, who lived around the same time as Lais, coined the term κορινθιάζομαι (*corinthianize)*, meaning to practice fornication (Henderson fragment 370). In the Roman era, Greco-Roman formal dining often involved sexual relations as a form of entertainment, especially during and after the evening meal, when a guest might expect sexual encounters and could even bring his own harp-girl or lover with him to facilitate sexual pleasures for himself (Fotopoulos 169–71; Plutarch 644C–D). Acceptance of bi-sexuality was widespread, and the Roman historian Seneca refers to the poor state of the wine server, who had to appease both his master's drunkenness and his lust (Seneca, Epistle 95). Quintillian, a Roman orator, decried that children could see "our female lovers and our male concubines; every dinner party is loud with foul songs and things are presented to their eyes about which we should blush to speak" (1.2.6–8).

Paul's letters to the Corinthians offer some confirmation of immorality at dinner parties. After reminding the Christian community in Corinth, in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, of who they used to be—fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, passive homosexual partners (μαλακοὶ—*malakoi*), active homosexual partners (ἀρσενοκοίτης—*arsenokoiteis*), and thieves—he referenced his ongoing argument against eating food offered to idols and urged them to flee fornication with prostitutes (Winter 110–20). In 1 Corinthians 10, again in the context of his opposition to Christian involvement in eating meat offered to idols, he commands them to both "flee from the worship of idols" (1 Cor. 10:14) and "not indulge in sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 10:8), indicating that the actions of idol worship and sexual immorality were linked in some way. John Fotopoulos has argued that the food offered to idols would have been eaten at formal meals where prostitutes would have been present (178). Sexual norms present a locus of contrast between the accepted practices of those worshiping the Greek and Roman deities of Corinth and the ideal behavior of the Christian community.

The Greco-Roman world had limitations on sexual behavior, however. Roman law declared some forms of homosexuality a crime, though its enforcement is questionable.[7] Also, the Christian community was not free of sexual misconduct. Clearly, Paul would not have had needed to protest against sexual immorality if it had not been happening in the Christian community. Some of the Christians had apparently interacted with prostitutes since Paul felt compelled to reason with them against the practice, telling them that their bodies were members of Christ and asking, "Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!" (1 Cor. 6:15). A more extreme violation of sexual norms is found in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul expressed disgust at the Christians' acceptance of a kind of sexual immorality "not found even among the nations (τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, *tois ethnesin*); for a man is living with his father's wife" (author's translation 1 Cor. 5:1). He was astounded that the Christians could be embracing such vice and even becoming arrogant (φυσιόω, *fusioō*) about it. Paul ordered that the man be removed from the fellowship (1 Cor. 5:4–5). These episodes of sexual activity within the Christian community are examples of converts from Corinth's polytheistic cults bringing their behavioral norms with them as they joined the Christians.

Sharing special prominence in Corinth with Aphrodite was Poseidon, god of the sea and earthquakes. Corinth's close relationship with the sea made Poseidon an important deity to honor, and a survey of all the coin types found in Corinth found that Poseidon was represented even more often than Aphrodite (Engels 96). He was considered the special sponsor of the biennial Isthmian Games, which were held at a special sanctuary to him at Isthmia, the southern harbor; his coins may have served as advertisements for the event. In this sanctuary complex at Isthmia was a large temple to Poseidon alongside a smaller one to Melikertes. Poseidon had a temple at each of Corinth's harbors as well as numerous statues, altars, and a fountain dedicated to him in Corinth itself. Reliance on Poseidon to grant calm seas was important for

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[7]Roman law used a double standard, allowing homosexuality as long as the passive male sexual partner was not a Roman citizen. Slaves and non-citizens were free to play the role of passive homosexual partner, but it was illegal for anyone to penetrate a Roman citizen as this violated the sanctity of a Roman citizen's body. Enforcing this prohibition would have proved difficult, and most literary references to the Roman law have to do with rumors and scandals rather than actual prosecutions of the crime. In contrast to the Roman standard, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 quoted above, prohibited both passive and active homosexuality with the terms μαλακοί and ἀρσενοκοίτης. Understanding the complexity of the Roman rule concerning homosexuality explains why Paul felt the need to use two different words to condemn homosexuality. See Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 110–120.

merchants who depended on safe sailing journeys to make a profit. Corinth, especially the Isthmus, was also subject to periodic earthquakes, which gave Corinthians another reason to grant Poseidon special consideration.

In contrast, the ideal Christian response to unpredictable seas and earthquakes was to trust in their God. Paul's unfortunate journey around Cape Malea resulted in his ship's being carried in the middle of a storm for days until food supplies ran out. Yet Paul did not despair, for he saw an angel "of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, do not be afraid, Paul . . . God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you" (Acts 27:23–25).

In the same sanctuary as Poseidon's temple was a small shrine to a young boy named Melikertes, who had died and turned into the marine god Palaimon. Though Aphrodite and Poseidon were special to Corinth, much as Athena was special to Athens, their status as major deities ensured that they were worshiped throughout the Empire in some fashion. Melikertes/Palaimon, however, was worshiped specifically in Corinth because his myth originated there during the Hellenic period. This local myth gave Corinth an origin story for the Isthmian Games. Origin stories such as that of Melikertes/Palaimon and of Bellerophon and Pegasus helped to provide Corinth with a civic identity, which obedience to Paul's command "flee from the worship of idols" would have disrupted.

According to the Melikertes myth, Hera, the wife of Zeus, became angry with the young boy Melikertes's father, Athamas, because of his kindness to her enemy Dionysos. She drove him into madness so that he turned on his wife Ino and two sons, murdering Melikertes's older brother, Learchus. Ino and Melikertes fled until they were cornered on a cliff where Ino chose to jump into the sea with Melikertes. The result of the sad death of the mother and child was that they both became immortal, Ino as the goddess Leukothea and Melikertes as Palaimon, a marine deity closely associated with Poseidon. As the deity Palaimon arose, a dolphin carried Melikertes's dead body to the Isthmus, where the ruler of Corinth, Sisyphus, granted him a noble burial and honored him with the first Isthmian Games (Gebhard 168).

Worship of Melikertes-turned-Palaimon occurred especially at the celebration of the biennial Games. Though this cult was started long before the Roman conquest in 146 BCE, the Roman colonists quickly resumed its practice and wasted no time in reclaiming the Isthmian Games for Corinth upon their arrival. Most likely, the first Isthmian Games in the new colony would have occurred in 40 BCE (Gebhard 182). A ritual ceremony would be

performed at the Games, most likely at night, with two young Corinthian men carrying a bed of pine branches with a statue of Melikertes on it, reenacting his funeral while singing a traditional funeral dirge (θρἔνος, *threnos*). At least the main features of this Greek celebration of Melikertes/Palaimon appear to have carried over into the Roman period, as multiple literary sources indicate (Gebhard 180). The first shrine to Melikertes/Palaimon built in the sanctuary of Poseidon was constructed in the mid-first century CE, contemporary to Paul's arrival in Corinth. Corinthian Christians would have been surrounded by celebrations of the Melikertes/Palaimon myth, certainly every two years during the Isthmian Games, if not more frequently.

Whereas the story of Melikertes/Palaimon was specifically tied to the Isthmian Games, the myth of Bellerophon and Pegasus explained the origin of Corinth's chief water supply, the Peirene fountain. Called holy (σέμνος, *semnos*) in Euripedes' *Medea* (8), the fountain gained its reputation as a special place through myths involving the winged horse, Pegasus. According to Strabo, the Peirene was connected via underground tunnels to a smaller fountain on the Acrocorinth, and Pegasus's hoof striking the ground on the Acrocorinth started the flow of both (Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.21). In another story, Bellerophon, grandson of the famous Corinthian king Sisyphus, sought to kill the Chimera, a fire-breathing monster. A seer instructed him that this feat would only be possible if he captured Pegasus, and he did so with Athena's assistance by throwing a golden bridle over his head after finding Pegasus drinking at the Peirene fountain. Bellerophon then rode off on the winged horse to successfully accomplish the task. Bellerophon and Pegasus were portrayed on statues in the city, on coinage, and in processions through the city (Engels 99–100; Apuleis 11.8). As one of the two main fountains in Roman Corinth (Robinson 129–38), at least some Corinthian Christians would have used the Peirene and been aware of its mythical background. Visitors from throughout the Empire who came to the spring on the Acrocorinth, believing it to be connected to the Peirene, treated it as a holy place by inscribing dedications on its walls (Engels 100).

Both Melikertes/Palaimon and Bellerophon and Pegasus at the Peirene Fountain constituted part of Corinth's mythical history, which functioned to help shape the Corinthians' civic identity. Commemoration of these mythical stories through religious ceremonies and festivals was a part of history-keeping in Corinth. To participate in the celebration of Corinth's history, however, would have involved interaction with idol worship and, in Paul's mind, with demons (δαιμονίων, *daimonion*). He offered an alternative historical basis to

the Christian community as descendants of Israel, joined to the Israelites through common faith in the same God. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul addressed the Corinthians as siblings (ἀδελφοί, *adelphoi)* and referred to the Israelites as "our fathers." He then described the activities of the Israelites, who in unity—Paul repeated the word all (πάντες, *pantes*) five times—followed the spiritual rock of Christ until a section of them became idolaters and indulged in sexual immorality, causing God to strike many of them down. Paul provided the example of the Israelites as an encouragement and admonition to the Corinthians in his effort to convince them to "flee from the worship of idols," arguing that just as in "Israel according to the flesh" those who eat the sacrifices are partners in the altar, so do the Corinthians become partners in a demonic altar when they eat the food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 10:18–20). Paul's effort in convincing the Corinthians to avoid idol worship of any kind hinged on the community of believers sharing in the heritage of the Jewish people. Since commemoration of Corinthian history involved festivals such as that of Melikertes and idol worship, Paul effectively replaced the history of those in the Christian community who were not of Jewish background with his own and that of Israel.[8] For Christians of Greek or Roman background, becoming a full part of the Christian community meant leaving a part of their civic identity behind.

Another aspect of "fleeing from idols" that would have removed Corinthian converts from the civic community was the avoidance of emperor worship. The role of idolatrous religion in maintaining civic and imperial identity was most apparent in the imperial cult, which included emperor worship. The Senate's apotheosis of Julius Caesar marked the beginning of a new Roman trend: adding dead rulers to the number of the gods. Under Augustus, worship of the living emperor began, although much less pronounced in Rome than in the provinces. Around 12 BCE, Augustus began to take such bold steps as instituting the municipal group, the *Augustales,* as an official way for wealthy freedmen or freeborn outsiders to enter municipal life through the imperial cult (Laird 72–75). He made efforts to include common people in the cult as a way to encourage devotion to the state. After he died, an official act of the Senate granted him divine status, establishing for him a temple and priests in Rome itself in addition to those already present throughout the Empire. Subsequent emperors continued the cult of the dead emperor with varying degrees of urgency, and the practice soon extended to include

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[8]For a complete discussion of the background of Corinthian Christian identity formation, see Cavan W. Concannon, *"When You Were Gentiles."*

worship of their families as well. In Corinth, ready evidence of the imperial cult can be seen in the ancient forum. The base of a statue used by the imperial cult is still visible today. A likely reconstruction of the inscription on the base is "*DIVO-AVGVSTO-SACRVM*," meaning the statue that once stood upon the base was that of divine Augustus (Laird 67–116). The temple of Octavia, the sister of Augustus, functioned as the center of the federal imperial cult of Achaea in Corinth. The temple overlooked the forum from an elevated position higher than all the other temples not on the Acrocorinth, indicating its importance. Corinth's role as the host of the federal, or provincial, cult meant that emperor worship in Corinth extended to the entire province of Achaea, not just an individual city, and enabled Corinth to require funds from surrounding cities for the annual celebration (Winter 269). Festivities honoring the emperor occurred annually on the emperor's birthday, at which Corinthians wore crowns and offered sacrifices in front of the emperor's statue and at the temple of Octavia. Additionally, every four years, the Isthmian Games were called the "greater games" and conducted under the aegis of the imperial cult, combining with the nearby Caesarean Games and Imperial Contests (Winter 271). Worship of the emperor included offering sacrifices at the temple of Octavia or in front of statues of the emperor, and doing so was an important component of civic and imperial identity in Corinth. By honoring the emperor, citizens in Roman cities could show fidelity to the empire since worshiping the emperor was the same as proclaiming loyalty to Rome.

Paul argued that Christians striving to "flee from the worship of idols" could not continue to honor the emperor through worship because Jesus was now κύριος (*kurios*—Lord) and σωτήρ (*soter*—Savior), both titles the imperial cult used to describe the emperor. In 54 CE, however, shortly after Paul completed his time in Corinth, the city became the center of the federal imperial cult of Achaea, combined with the onset of the "greater games" (Spawforth 161–163). Epigraphical evidence suggests that the president of the Games often invited all Roman citizens to come dine at Isthmia before the Games, which would have affected the elite among the Christians if any were Roman citizens like Paul. These meals would have been a chance to associate with dignitaries from throughout the province and the Empire. New Christians who wished to abstain from taking part in the Games or in emperor worship were allowed to do so in the first century, most likely as a result of Gallio's ruling that granted Christians the same exemptions as Jews (Winter 276–80), but the social pressure to attend would have been formidable for any Christians who were Roman citizens. New Corinthian Christians who

chose to refrain from celebrations on the emperor's birthday or attendance at the Isthmian Games had to remove themselves from a significant part of the local Corinthian civic community and lose a way to engage in the Roman imperial community.

A third layer of religious influence in Corinth besides those of Greek and Roman origin came from Egypt, specifically in the henotheistic cult of Isis and Serapis (Smith 201–31). The date of the Egyptian deities' arrival in Corinth is unknown, but a time during the Hellenistic period seems likely as evidence records the presence of the Egyptian cults in neighboring Athens and Delos at that time (Smith 228). Beyond the rather scarce archeological record, Pausanius and Lucius Apuleis described the presence of Isis and Serapis; Apuleis recorded a vision of Isis and his later initiation into the cult in great detail in *The Golden Ass*. Isis and Serapis were worshiped together as they were siblings as well as husband and wife. In the origin myth, Serapis's evil brother Set killed and dismembered him. Isis, Serapis's sister and wife, travelled throughout Egypt to collect all of his body parts and, upon succeeding, resurrected him through her mourning over his body. Serapis then became the god of the underworld and helped his son Horus destroy his brother and nemesis, Set. The resurrection theme in the origin myth was an important component of the Isis cult and provides the closest parallel among the religions of Corinth to the Christian concept of resurrection.[9]

The expectation in Eastern cults of a blessed afterlife in exchange for adherence to the cult paralleled Paul's teaching in his letters to Corinthian Christians. His instructions in 2 Corinthians reveal that some Christians did not believe they would have an afterlife. Paul declared that "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence" (2 Cor. 4:14). Continuing, he described the current body as an earthly tent groaning for the future when "what is mortal will be swallowed up by life." In 1 Corinthians, he placed the entirety of faith on the fact of Christ's resurrection, saying that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith has been futile and you are still dead in your sins. Then those also who have died have perished" (1 Cor. 15:17, 18). He argued that if there is no resurrection, there is no reason to worry about living this life well, quoting a proverb from one of the Greek playwright Menander's plays: "if the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (1 Cor. 15:32). Paul placed the entire value of a Christian's faith upon resurrection, and converts

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[9]Everett Ferguson does not view the resurrection of Serapis as a true resurrection as in the Christian version but simply as a restoration to live in Hades (270).

to Christianity from followers of Isis would have seen continuity between the two religious constructs.

The new Christian cult shared the Isis cult's doctrine of resurrection, yet a contrast was readily apparent to Corinthians familiar with both. Though the Isis cult was welcoming and "appealed to the depressed classes of the Roman empire" (Takacs 4), the cost of undergoing initiation as Lucius Apuleis did was formidable. Since only those who were initiated could access Isis' resurrection, eternal life was only available to those wealthy enough to pay for it (Koester 191). Though there may have been many worshipers in the Isis cult in Corinth, only the small inner circle was initiated, and the initiatory rights themselves were kept a secret (Ferguson 299). In contrast, the Christian community, though it also required baptism as an initiation process, did not require any monetary gifts from converts. The Christians welcomed any who would join their community, no matter their background or financial status. However, Paul and those who followed him restricted the openness of the Corinthian Christian community by requiring converts to leave their old religious structures behind and to grant the worship of Jesus exclusive prominence.

Since Paul's Christianity was an exclusive religion incapable of fusing with surrounding cults, he used his apostolic authority to discipline and correct those who had failed to separate themselves from the other Corinthian religions. To abandon idol or emperor worship required the new Christians from various cultic backgrounds to separate themselves in many ways from the civic community of Corinth and, on a broader scale, from the imperial identity of Rome since cultic practices were intertwined in nearly every aspect of Corinthian life, including loyalty to Rome. The difficulty of this separation kept some Christian converts from successfully obeying Paul's command to "flee from the worship of idols," creating strain within the Christian community and some confusion about which practices from diverse religious backgrounds were allowable within the Christian community.

CONCLUSION

The religious backgrounds of converts to Christianity strongly influenced the development of the local Christian community in Roman Corinth, especially Gentile converts who had previously been engaged in polytheistic cultic activity. An analysis of the problems that the Apostle Paul was attempting to deal with in his letters demonstrates that not all members of the Christian community at Corinth saw their new religion the same way Paul did, giving

him reasons to offer criticism and advice. The combination of Corinthians who had followed Judaism with those who had worshiped in polytheistic cults caused conflict and uncertainty about whether Christians needed to be circumcised, whether they could eat meat from the market or attend the Isthmian Games, whether they could or should attend evening meals in temples, what constituted acceptable sexual behavior, and what they needed to do to be considered a member of the Christian community.

For Paul and the Corinthian Christians who followed his lead, the definition of a Christian was one who had faith in Jesus Christ as Messiah. Paul's focus on belief as the dividing line can be seen in 2 Corinthians 6, where he used "believer" to refer to those within the Christian community and "unbeliever" to refer to those outside the community: "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). Though belief was Paul's only requirement for admission into the community and assurance of salvation, he thought that belief in Jesus would produce a change in behavior. Paul told the Corinthians that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17). Here was Paul's answer to both converts of Jewish background and those who came from the idol-worshiping cults: there is no reason to retain the religious practices of the past because in Christ everything is supplied. Christ granted liberty from the law and circumcision, requiring only a "circumcision of the heart" and creating a religion not bound by ethnicity. At the same time, following Christ was exclusive, and it was impossible to "drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons" together because to do so would surely provoke the Lord to jealousy (1 Cor. 10:14–22). The power of true belief in Jesus would compel new Gentile converts to pursue moral lives even without the strict rules of the Jews. Paul's trust in faith (πίστις, *pistis*) was his answer to the difficulties created by a community that merged people from distinctly different religious backgrounds.

For some Corinthian Christians, most likely former God-fearers, proselytes, or Jews, it seemed natural that distinctions they were accustomed to, such as circumcision or refraining from meat offered to idols, would be the boundaries of the Christian community, and their reluctance to leave behind the ceremonial law would have led to consternation at other Christians continuing to eat meals in idolatrous temples. For others, with backgrounds in the polytheistic cults of Corinth, placing boundaries between different cults was an alien concept; they argued that freedom in Christ allowed them to continue their old interactions with the polytheistic cults of Corinth, including eating in

temples and attending the Isthmian games. Perhaps some of these Christians simply added Jesus to their pantheon, continuing to perform cult activities in honor of other gods. Clearly at least some Christians were willing to allow a man living with his step-mother to continue as a member of the community, a loose sexual boundary that Paul found reprehensible (1 Cor. 5).

Consideration of these different viewpoints on the boundaries of the Christian community, focusing on non-elites and what an average convert to Christianity would have believed, helps to fill in a historiographical hole created by a tendency among historians to treat the beliefs and rhetoric of Paul as indicative of the entire Christian community and to ignore the effects of the local religious context. For example, Wayne A. Meeks does discuss the problem of boundaries in his analysis of early Christian communities, but he attributes the boundaries to a supposed class distinction without any reference to converts' previous religious experiences and the effects of their backgrounds on their interactions in the Christian community (84–110). Focusing on one location and one set of Pauline texts, in the manner of Bruce W. Winter, reveals the connection between the local religious setting and the information found in the texts. Also, whereas many historical studies have focused only on Jewish-Christian relations, a direct comparison of Christianity with polytheistic cults as well as with Judaism is important to understanding the boundaries of the Christian community. The religious backgrounds of all the converts to early Corinthian Christianity were vital in determining the nature of the early Christianity and its diversity of thought.

Several questions about Corinth's Christians arise as important subjects for future research: whether it is accurate to place all the polytheistic cult worshipers in one group of Christians, for instance, and whether a significant distinction existed between the worshipers of Isis, Aphrodite, and Poseidon that affected Christian community. The focus on salvation and resurrection found in the Isis cult may have changed how Christian converts from that cult conceived of the Christian concepts of salvation and resurrection whereas the greater Greco-Roman pantheon did not emphasize an afterlife. A parallel question is if all the Corinthian Jews can be lumped together or if significant differences characterized multiple Diaspora communities or at least multiple Jewish groups within the Corinthian Diaspora community. With the question of resurrection as again an example, the presence of Sadducees among the Corinthian Jews would help to explain why there was resistance to Paul's concept of resurrection since the Sadducee sect of the Jews did not believe in the possibility of resurrection (Matt. 22:23–33). These questions of further

diversity among the groups surrounding the Christians seem likely to yield affirmative answers, but additional study is needed on the topic.

Also in question is how representative the Corinthian Christian community was of early Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. If multiple conceptions of Christianity's boundaries existed in other cities as well, perhaps they also arose from the diverse backgrounds of Christian converts who faced the struggle to "flee from the worship of idols." Perhaps in Rome, for instance, it meant something different for a polytheistic cult worshiper to become a Christian than it did in Corinth. Especially helpful would be a comparison of the religious backgrounds found in multiple cities along with a comparison of these cities' Christian communities. Finding differences among the Christian communities that correlate to variances in the local religious backgrounds would show how strong an effect the local environments had on early Christian development throughout the Empire.

Other questions might address the trans-local nature of Christianity. Though Christianity likely developed in different ways in different locations, the connections between early Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean region appear to have been strong, as evidenced by Paul's request of the Corinthians to send monetary aid to other Christian communities in need (2 Cor. 9) and the extensive travel by missionaries such as Paul and Apollos between communities throughout the region. Corinthian Christians "were made aware that they belonged to a larger movement, 'with all who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place'" (Meeks 107; Lieu *Neither Jew nor Greek?* 173), raising questions about how the universal nature of Christianity interacted with local influences on Christian communities. If there were different groups of Christians in Corinth, perhaps there were even bigger distinctions between Christians in Corinth and Christians in another city like Antioch, and these distinctions might have had a major influence on trans-local Christian identity.

Many of these questions could be answered through further studies of Christians in their local contexts. Meanwhile, the example of Corinth provides one model for how Christianity might have developed throughout the Roman Empire and what it meant for Jews or Gentiles to become a part of early Christian communities. The struggle to maintain a traditional cultural identity while joining a new religious community surely transcends time and place, occurring among converts today as well as two thousand years ago, but the struggle also has unique features that arise from a particular context as it did among the Christian converts in Corinth during the time of Paul.

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The author may be contacted at
db080214@ohio.edu.